

# India's Forests and Neoliberal Fantasies of the State

MADHUMITA DUTTA

The India State Forest Report 2009, a biennial assessment of India's forests published by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), announced a 4.75% (3.13 million ha) increase in forest cover over the period 1997-2007 with the total forest cover standing at 69.09 million ha. Reportedly, hills and tribal districts, especially the north-eastern (NE) states, contributed significantly to this increase. This should not surprise anyone, for the tribal-dominated NE states are known for their robust community-led forest protection and regeneration. However, what remains to be seen

**Nought without Cause: Almost Everyone's Guide to the Underlying Causes of Deforestation and Forest Degradation in the Era of Neoliberal Globalisation** compiled by Milind Wani (*Pune: Kalpavriksh, Vasundhara, Global Forest Coalition*), 2010; pp 219, price not mentioned.

is for how long the tribal communities will be able to fight for and protect their forests from corporate cupidity instigated by the neoliberal fantasies of the State.

## Ominous Signs

The portents do not inspire much optimism. Consider two telling examples from

the state of Meghalaya. LaFarge Umiam Mining, a subsidiary of the French cement giant, has been quarrying lime stone there without the requisite environmental clearance. While the Supreme Court has stayed the mining operations for the time being, the attorney general of India has pleaded in the court for lifting of the stay citing "sensitive political and diplomatic issues in view of international agreements". In a similar cynical vein, Uranium Corporation of India (UCIL) has sought a no-objection certificate (NOC) from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) for exploring uranium in Balpakram National Park, home to some of the world's endangered flora and fauna. With the current political establishment gung-ho about expanding nuclear energy, it is only a matter of time before UCIL gets the green signal.

Laws do exist to protect forests and the rights of its inhabitants but they are

observed more often in the breach than in practice. For instance, the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) 1980 puts strict restrictions on diversion of forest land for non-forest activity, while the Indian Constitution prohibits transfer of tribal lands to non-tribals. Yet, states like Orissa have diverted large tracts of forest land (about 13,557 ha) over the last decade, mostly for mining activities. Ditto for Chhattisgarh. In fact, there are more than 1,000 recorded cases of diversion of forest land for industrial purposes in last four years which clearly violate the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006.

### Blight on Forests

*Nought without Cause*, the book under review, is a valuable attempt to throw some light on the underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation in the country. An outcome of a national workshop held in Bhubaneswar in January 2008, the book is a collection of research articles divided into thematic and case studies. While the latter tries to expose the devil through fine descriptions of the blight that mars India's forests and its dwellers, the former zooms out on the big picture and connects the trees of deforestation, so to speak, with the wood of the new economic mantra of attracting more and more foreign and Indian corporate investments.

All the five case studies are from Orissa, which is an illuminating exemplar of what has gone wrong with our forests. Orissa boasts of about 60 Mous worth over Rs 5 lakh crore that it has signed with various corporations. The case studies from the districts of Khandadhar-Sundergarh, Nayagarh, Sambalpur showcase how rich forest ecosystems, delicately entwined with forest dwelling communities, are slowly being decimated – environmentally, socially, culturally – through the corporate-driven agenda of the State.

"Khandadhar, Life-line of Northern Orissa" illustrates the threat posed by the proposed 6,204 ha iron ore mines of the Korean multinational Pohang Steel Company (posco) to the densely forested homes of the Paudi Bhuyan primitive tribe. The project is estimated to affect more than 10,000 ha of forest cover. With

the state government squarely behind the project, the environmental clearance (EC) for the Rs 51,000 crore project, which includes iron ore mines in Khandadhar, a steel plant in Jagatsinghpur and a captive port in Paradeep, was cleverly broken into separate clearance processes so that the road is clear of any hurdles in the way of posco getting the EC for the entire project.

### Licence to Destroy

Case studies from Khedapada, Nayagarh and Lapanga Sambalpur districts demonstrate how diverse and highly evolved community-led forest protection methods, such as the *Thengapali* (baton volunteer) in which baton-wielding village volunteers patrol the forest against illegal logging, are unable to protect their forests because of industrial and road projects. These projects have resulted in the death of over 1,000 sal trees in the community-protected forest area with, needless to say, the collusion with and connivance of the forest department. Interestingly, an example from Gadabanikilo village of Nayagarh district turns on its head the claims of the much-touted Joint Forest Management, which has dismantled a 50-year-old people-led Community Forest Management in the area. The standard "one size fits all" approach of the government has ensured lesser community participation, intra-community tensions and limited community rights over forests.

The five thematic papers offer a larger political and economic context to the changes taking place on the ground. "Globalisation and the Ecological Crisis" talks about the real cost of a fuel-driven economy and the failure, nay refusal, to internalise these costs while devising economic policies, rendering natural resources and the people dependent on it cheap and dispensable. "Licence to Destroy" describes the impact of neoliberal processes on India's environmental policies and law. Looked upon as a "bottleneck" to speedy implementation of projects, the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification 1994 has been diluted several times over and was overhauled in 2006 in active "consultation" with powerful institutions like the World Bank and industrial lobbies such as the Confederation of Indian

Industry (CII) and the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI). The Environmental Impact Assessment, which was conceived of as a precautionary approach to assessing and granting environmental clearances, has been effectively reduced to a subterfuge by the state for legitimising environmentally destructive projects. And speaking of forests, the following statistic is more than telling: the MOEF has allowed diversion of 11,40,176.86 ha of forest land for non-forest use since the FCA came into being in 1980.

The rest of the thematic papers illustrates the links between deforestation and economic growth in Orissa, and the role played by financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund, which through loans that stipulated 160 conditions ensured that mineral and forest resources are sold at cheaper prices to foreign companies.

The book, while commendable in general and certainly deserving of the reference shelf, however lacks editorial polish, is at times tediously didactic, and is a tad heavy on data and tables, all of which may detract from holding the lay reader's attention for long. The subtitle "Almost Everyone's Guide..." therefore is slightly misplaced. Although the publishers proudly claim that they have given the writers free rein in both style and substance, they would have done well by being a little more sympathetic to the reader's point of view given the book's claim to be a guide for everyone.

Madhumita Dutta ([madhu.dutta@gmail.com](mailto:madhu.dutta@gmail.com)) is a Chennai-based member of Citizens' Research Collective on SEZs.

#### Permission for Reproduction of Articles Published in EPW

No article published in EPW or part thereof should be reproduced in any form without prior permission of the author(s).

A soft/hard copy of the author(s)'s approval should be sent to EPW.

In cases where the email address of the author has not been published along with the articles, EPW can be contacted for help.